

New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1950

Volume XI, Number 14

• Rachel W. Coffin, Editor •

Week of May 22, 1950

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Theatre Openings

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Theatre Critics' Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York newspapers.
NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK POST HOME NEWS
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"The Liar"

Journal  American

May 19, 1950

Its Good Points Are Dulled by Irresolution

By ROBERT GARLAND

There are so many worthy things about the musical version of Carlo Goldoni's "The Liar" that the new tenant of the Broadhurst should be more continuously entertaining than it is. Unfortunately, it isn't!

Produced by Dorothy Willard and Thomas Hammond, this is the operetta-commedia dell'arte Alfred Drake, with Edward Eager, librettist for his own usage with lyrics by Mr. Eager and music by John Mundy.

It suffers most from irresolute direction. Considering the circumstances, this is understandable. "The Liar" started out with Norris Houghton in charge. Then, when Mr. Drake took over, Mr. Houghton withdrew.

So the operetta-commedia dell'arte can't make up its mind whether to take itself seriously as operetta or spoof itself as commedia dell'arte. It now does one, then the other, and, too often, neither.

Again, musically as well as bookishly, it deserts itself over-frequently. A director, other than a co-maker, on taking over, would have cut the piece unfeelingly. But Alfred Drake, on taking over, didn't.

And the music, even when

charming, is derivative!

Tied Up in Knots

If "The Liar" entangles Lello Bisognosi, the prevaricating hero, how can I hope to untangle it? So many plots, subplots, personations, impersonations, guises and disguises go on that—

Well, at first you try to keep Lello and Arlecchino, Brighella and Florindo, Rosaura and Beatrice Balanzoni, Ottavio Ossimorsini and Pantalone Bisognosi, all separate in your mind. After a while, you don't.

Carlo Goldoni wrote at least a hundred-and-a-quarter comedies. "The Liar" now sounds like all of them being said, sung and adapted at the same time. The plot is its own worst inunderstandability.

Suffice it to report that Lello fancies himself as the greatest lover, as well as the greatest liar, of his period. The period is the 16th Century. It is Spring in a somewhat shaky Venice.

But Lello comes a cropper when his wife, Cleonice, shows up from elsewhere. In the person of Barbara Ashley, she takes over not only the liar who is Signore Bisognosi but "The Liar" which is the show.

"THE LIAR"

Musical version of the comedy by Carlo Goldoni; book by Edward Eager and Alfred Drake; music by John Mundy; lyrics by Mr. Eager; staged by Mr. Drake; musical sequences staged by Hanya Holm; scenery by Donald Oenslager; costumes by Motley; musical direction by Lehman Engel; presented by Dorothy Willard and Thomas Hammond at the Broadhurst Theatre, May 18, 1950. The cast: Innkeeper.... Walter F. Appler Innkeeper's Wife.... Jean Handzlik Servingwench.... Lee Wilcox Servingmen.... Leonardo Cimino and Martin Balsam Woman at Window.... May Muth Fiori.... Margery Oldroyd Vico.... David Collyer Vegetabill.... Marybelle Norton Letter Carrier.... Leslie Litomy Urchin.... William Myers Capt. of Venetian Guards.... Robert Penn Lello Bisognosi.... William Eythe

Seldom have you beheld so ornate a walk-away.

Does Well Enough

Although not too well adapted to the role, William Eythe, substituting for Dennis Harrison before coming into town, does well enough, and toothfully, by the pseudologist who furnishes the titular motivation.

Until Barbara Ashley appears at long last, Paula Laurence, as Colombina, gives him the most assured support. She, as the Sabina of the Balanzoni household, is a stinging-actress of distinction.

Melville Cooper, as Pantalone Bisognosi, has himself an Englishman-in-16th-Century Venice

Arlecchino.... Joshua Shelley Brighella.... Russell Collins Florindo Pallido.... Glenn Burris Rosaura Balanzoni....

Barbara Moser Beatrice Balanzoni....

Karen Lindgren Ottavio Ossimorsini....

Stanley Carlson Colombina.... Paula Laurence

Pantalone Bisognosi....

Melville Cooper Dr. Balanzoni.... Philip Coolidge

Cleonice Anselmi....

Barbara Ashley

Synopsis: Place: Venice. Time: Spring in the 16th century. The entire action takes place within 24 hours. Act I: Scene 1. The Square. Scene 2. The Inn. Scene 3. The Doctor's House. Scene 4. The Square. Act II: Scene 1. The Square. Scene 2. The Doctor's House. Scene 3. The Square.

time. Joshua Shelly carols about stomachs satirically, even as Miss Laurence carols about Spring.

And, as I may have hinted, John Mundy's music is less original than Edward Eager's lyrics. Donald Oenslager's Venice is tremely, Alfred Drake's direction is sparing and Motley's costumes are—motive!

Yet, when Broadway's newcomer gathers in its component parts and pulls itself together, it manages to be entertaining. But, back where we started, the entertainment isn't continuous. This is its shortcoming.

Running true to type, "The Liar" is unreliable.

DAILY NEWS

May 19, 1950

The Eythe Man Cometh as a Liar But 'The Liar' Goeth Too Slowly

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Alfred Drake, who has been trouping from Venice to Mantua, Padua and other wolf-whistle stops on the old Italian circuit in "Kiss Me, Kate," had a good enough idea when he thought of making a musical of Goldoni's 18th Century comedy, "The Liar." The play is light-minded enough to make the book for a show—but in performance last evening at the Broadhurst "The Liar" was a laggard frolic.

There are good people in it, and fine settings and costumes, and a singable song or two, and some humor—but there also are some awfully long stretches of unexcit-

ing plot and the net effect is squawky rather than bouncy.

William Eythe is playing the title role—a gray and personable fellow who will lie himself into any romance or out of any jam with great ease. It is a part the able Mr. Drake must have thought of as his own. Under Mr. Drake's direction, Mr. Eythe works with agility and charm.

Takes Off Infrequently.

But "The Liar" gets going only once in a while—as when Paula Laurence, who has authority, drive and a sense of humor, sings a song like "Spring." Or when Melville Cooper is batting his eyes and stammering, or when Joshua Shelley is silently mouthing imprecations while the rest of the cast is industriously singing a big choral number.

(Fashion note: The locale is 17th Century Venice, and as any student of painting knows the dames then had high, rounded bust lines. In her first-act costume, which had

a V shaped bodice, Miss Laurence was quite interesting because she looked like a ingeniously arranged double-scoop ice cream cone. (Vanilla.)

There's a Song, Anyhow.

The music is by John Mundy, father of Meg Mundy, of "Respectful Prostitute" fame. I guess the hit tune is "Lackaday," a good romantic number, and some of the choral numbers have wit and style. The lyrics are by Edward Eager, and they are, to use a dirty word, serviceable. Donald Oenslager's Venetian setting is sunny and lovely and ingeniously devised, and the Motley costumes, like all costumes by Motley, are very fine.

Among the others of an amiable company are Barbara Moser, an attractive ingenue; Glenn Burris, a sweet-toned tenor; Philip Coolidge, a crusty comedian; Russell Collins, another crusty comedian, and Barbara Ashley, a sultry siren. They all work with a will and have their special talents, but even so "The Liar" looks more like something for Mask and Wig or the Triangle Club than for Shubert Alley.

By OTIS L. GUERNSEY JR.

Some Bright Moments

THE adaptation of Carlo Goldoni's "The Liar" at the Broadhurst is extravagant, costumed buffoonery with musical interludes. Under the direction of Alfred Drake, who also collaborated on the book, a cast headed by William Eythe and Melville Cooper pirouettes through the paces of what amounts to a hopped-up operetta set in Sixteenth Century Venice. In it the flourish is used instead of wit and musical machinery substituted for melody. Performed with an over-

whelming vivacity, "The Liar" drowns out some of the worst spots in a minor satire and manages to let a few bright moments come through the hullabaloo.

There is no real foundation laid for burlesque in the show. It is merely a series of incidents, most of them romantic, concerning a young fellow who returns to the town of his birth after a long absence and gradually involves himself in a tangle of lies. This poseur, as played by William Eythe, is never at rest as he prances, cajoles and gestures his way through the emptiness of a story that is almost too flimsy even for farce. The entire work, like Eythe's role, has been staged by Drake at a high pitch, with many comings and goings through a revolving set de-

signed by Donald Oenslager. This style keeps up a constant pretense of gaiety, though it is sometimes more fatiguing than convincing.

John Mundy's score is a series of interpolations which do not knit tightly into the book but which contains an adequate number of pleasant interludes. Most of it consists of patter-songs and tongue-in-cheek roundelays like "Truth" and "Women's Work," in both of which the roguish Miss Paula Lawrence is happily involved. There is also one good melody called "Lackaday," very well delivered by tenor Glenn Burris and Barbara Moser. The music does not soar, but it is suitable. The same applies to Edward Eager's lyrics, which are particularly important in such a situation.

The cast includes a large parade of clowns, headed by Melville Cooper, who is a very British Venetian as the hero's wine-merchant father. Philip Coolidge does an excellent job of impersonating a wispy, doddering old father of two attractive daughters, and Joshua Shelley as a sort of Shakespearean comic man-servant and Stanley Carlson as a roaring, protesting suitor are a great help in sprucing up these doings. Barbara Ashley comes in at the end to add a kind of Katisha touch to a violent finale. "The Liar" is a curious mixture of Elizabethan and Gilbert and Sullivan characters, dressed to the teeth by Motley. It is uncertain except in its own enthusiasm, which lights up at least a part of the evening at the Broadhurst.

Daily Mirror

May 19, 1950

'The Liar' Fails to Tell An Interesting Story

By ROBERT COLEMAN

It is not a pleasant task this morning to report that "The Liar," which arrived at the Broadhurst Theatre last evening, is a pedestrian and dull musical, for Dorothy Willard and Thomas Hammond have evidently produced it with a lavish hand and something bordering on affection.

They have given it the benefits of talented players, attractive Donald Oenslager settings and tasteful Motley costumes. But we kept wishing for a livelier and more tuneful show to fill the Oenslager decor, for more distinguished and amusing material to reward the princ-

pals and the audience.

Alfred Drake, who is so wonderful in "Kiss Me, Kate," and Edward Eager adapted the book from a Carlo Goldoni comedy. Eager equipped it with lyrics, and John Mundy supplied it was a score. Drake even took a leave of absence from "Kate"

to attend to the staging, with an assist from Hanya Holm on the musical sequences. A work by that combination ought to add up to something more than tediousness, but it seldom does.

The central character in "The Liar" is a handsome paraphrase of Don Quixote, whose head is turned a little by studying too many plays rather than reading romantic novels. His vivid imagination and overly glib tongue get him into and out of numerous scrapes with the law and susceptible young woman. There is a sub-plot wherein he is tamed by a flirtatious and domineering young widow, a twist on "The Taming of the Shrew."

The versatile William Eythe stepped into the title role on short notice during a Philadelphia tune-up. His performance is dynamic and appealing. He is an artist at making much from little.

Melville Cooper, a really great comedian, is almost wasted as

the young swashbuckler's father. Glenn Burris, Barbara Moser and Barbara Ashley bring fine voices to the Mundy-Eager score. In fact, their admirable vocalizing stopped the proceedings on a couple of occasions and garnered robust applause.

Paula Lawrence, Joshua Shelley, Russell Collins, Robert Penn, Philip Coolidge, Stanley Carlson, Karen Lindgren and Jean Handalik—gifted performers all—are handicapped by hapless scripting. William Myers proves himself a promising pantomimist in a minor part.

Lehman Engel, one of the busiest men currently on Broadway, finds time to conduct the orchestra with style and verve.

"The Liar" is an amazing demonstration of how a number of outstanding talents can combine to small purpose. Robert Burns said it better with "the best laid schemes of mice and men—"

New York Post

HOME NEWS

May 19, 1950

Some Very Earnest Actors at Play

By Richard Watts Jr.

Since Carlo Goldoni was an eighteenth century Italian dramatist, I wasn't quite yet around when his plays were first produced. I cannot, therefore, tell you if the musical version of his comedy called "The Liar," which opened at the Broadhurst last night, is faithful to his spirit and quality. All I can say is that this free adaptation, with music by John Mundy, lyrics by Edward Eager, and book by Mr. Eager and Alfred Drake, is a tedious and self-conscious antic that does the em-

inent Venetian little credit.

The adapters have apparently just taken the general idea and background and attempted to retain chiefly Goldoni's mood of

gay and swashbuckling improvisation. Such a quality of spirited and amiably informal charade can be amusing enough when it is managed with the proper style and deftness. But in the current version both style and deftness are lacking, and the unfortunate result is an air of mannered prankishness that seems like the college dramatic society at play.

It is not difficult to see why Alfred Drake, that extremely accomplished young actor, should have interested himself in the enterprise. The central role of the romantic braggart, who gets himself hopelessly entangled in his own picturesque lies, is the kind of debonairly humorous part he can portray to perfection. "The Liar" might have been considerably better if Mr. Drake had acted in it, rather than confining his

work to the adaptation and direction. Yet even then I suspect it would have seemed heavy going in its high spirits.

It is all good-looking enough, with Donald Oenslager's sets and the costumes by Motley adding the proper color. The music by Mr. Mundy sounds quite pleasant, and the lyrics by Mr. Eager are amiably in the manner of the late W. S. Gilbert. Even the book has its moments of agreeable humor, in a somewhat studiously cultured fashion. Nevertheless it adds up into a remarkably tiresome romp, with the atmosphere of a sophomore lark, proving more of a nerve-wracking experience than anything approximating a joy.

Earnest Actors

The actors go about their prankishness with conscientious